

Why Lake County group is focusing on driverless cars, new technology

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The Lake County Transportation Alliance plans to shift its vision next year away from primarily cars and roads as a way to address traffic congestion in the region.

"We're at capacity. We're not going to be adding a lot of lanes to anything," LCTA President Suzanne Zupec said after the agency's annual meeting Wednesday, at the University Center of Lake County in Grayslake. "What comes after that?"

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It's a shift to thinking of transportation as a connected network that includes busses, trains, ride-shares and bicycles, said Bethany Williams, strategy and intelligence manager for Lake County Partners, the county's economic development agency.

"A true multimodal network would blend different forms of transportation to maximize each," she said.

Zupec led off the annual meeting with updates on the public/private advocacy group's vision, but the bulk of the session was devoted to three panelists discussing how driverless vehicles

and other technology could change the county's transportation network.

"What is the driverless city? That's a big question." said Ron Henderson, director of the Landscape Architecture & Urbanism program at the Illinois Institute of Technology and team member for The Driverless City Project.

The project investigated the implications of driverless and autonomous vehicles, in part by developing scenarios for future streetscapes.

If driving becomes less of a necessity for commuters, it is imperative for planners, landscape architects and public officials to understand the kind of place they want to create, Henderson said.

"What is the environment we want to live in and how do we leverage new technology to get there?" he asked.

Elizabeth Irvin, senior planner at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, said transportation is a key element in the agency's On To 2050 long-range plan for the region, which is expected to be complete in October 2018.

"There are a lot of emerging technologies out there that have the (potential) to change our region that we need to plan for," she said. "Where do we invest?"

Are there ways to partner with mobility service companies, for example, to connect difficult to serve places with public transit? Funding innovative and pilot projects and establishing a regulatory environment to facilitate innovation and regional priorities are among needed strategies, according to Irvin.

"The key part is it's not just trying to force people out of their cars, it's really important there is another alternative," she said.

As director of transit and new mobility practice leader for the Chicago firm Sam Schwartz Engineering, Joe Iacobucci has worked with cities, institutions and the private sector.

He listed six priorities for city leaders: promote equitable access to new jobs and services; plan for mixed use neighborhoods with fewer cars; leverage technology to enhance mobility; prioritize and modernize public transit; encourage adaptable parking; and implement dynamic pricing.